

Boost Reading Skills by Summer

Experts share their advice for helping every student reach the next level.

By Jennifer L. W. Fink

The end of the school year is in sight, but it's not too late to help lower-level readers catch up. We asked experts across the country about the most common obstacles to reading success—and effective ways to overcome them. Their insights and tips can help you make a real difference before summer begins.

Grades K–2

Solution #1 Look at the big picture

One of the biggest challenges for early readers is comprehension. They're so focused on decoding that they lose the thread of the story, says Katie Mastroleo, a reading specialist in Ohio. To help students see the bigger picture, Mastroleo advises pulling back. Start story time by having students peruse the book. Ask them what they think the story might be about; encourage them to think of words that might be part of the story. To build comprehension, ask questions like "What would make sense here?" Making predictions "helps them understand that there's more to reading than sounds," Mastroleo says.



Solution #2 Invest in fluency

It's tempting to think of fluency as the icing on the cake—what comes after the basics. But even kindergartners should be practicing fluency, because of its relationship to comprehension, says Valorie Falco, a New York-based elementary teacher and the coauthor of *Building Independent Readers*. "When students are fluent, they understand what characters are doing," Falco says.

Interactive read-alouds and shared reading help struggling readers build fluency. Falco likes to use picture books with strong characters and to ask students to "build a theory about the character based on the things the character is doing." When students understand the character, they're better able to use appropriate expressions as they read.

Readers Theater is another great activity for building fluency. "Reading is not just sounding words out. It's telling a story," Mastroleo says. "Readers Theater gets that across because students act out the parts with expression and enthusiasm."

Solution #3 Crack the code

To become proficient readers, students must learn how to crack the code, so to speak. So while it's important to spend time developing comprehension and fluency (and not to overemphasize decoding), it's equally important to make sure that primary graders spend some time each day learning to decode the written language. "Reading fundamentals should constitute the majority of teachers' daily literacy instruction," says Lindsay Hu, assistant professor of childhood education at Metropolitan College of New York. "I recommend at least an hour a day, broken up into five- to 10-minute activity intervals."

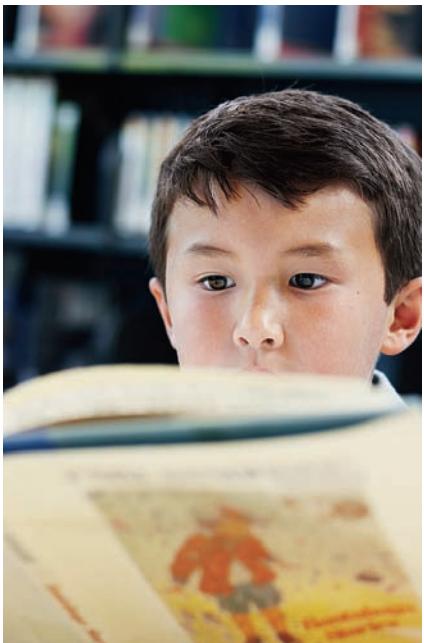
For specific advice on teaching phonics, sight-word instruction, and basic grammatical structures, visit scholastic.com/instructor.

Grades 3–5

Solution #1 Stress the fundamentals

At the upper-elementary level, struggling readers require targeted, specific instruction, so spend a few minutes each day assessing individual students' difficulties and develop activities to address them. Some students need help with sight words; others may need to focus on rhyming words. Teachers should also weave fundamentals into the rest of the curriculum, Hu says. "If you spend 15 minutes in the morning on phonics, spend five minutes of social studies talking about phonics in the text." Kids who are working on sight words can be instructed to look for them in their assigned reading.

Modeling is also crucial for upper graders. "Students need to know, for example, when to break a word down versus when to access sight words," Hu says. "The only way they are going to understand that is if a teacher specifically models that practice for them."



READING SUCCESS

Solution #2 Send strategies home

In grades 3–5, struggling readers often don't know how to integrate "school reading" with the reading they encounter in real life, Falco says. "We found that teachers often move to 'now you try it' too soon. Students need more scaffolding to become independent."

Review common text structures such as cause and effect, chronology, and problem and solution with your students. Understanding these can help students anticipate what comes next, which aids comprehension.

Involve parents and guardians. Hu suggests modeling strategies to the adults in your students' lives. "You want to show parents what literacy practice should look like," she says. "Differentiate your instruction by providing parents with specific questions to ask after home-reading sessions. Maybe you want little Susie to focus on the main character, while you want Bobby to focus on sight words."

Solution #3 Let interests lead the way

By third grade, the novelty of reading has worn off, and many students are tired of their teachers' sentimental choices.

At Pointe South Elementary School in Riverdale, Georgia, teachers allow total choice. "If my boys want to read about Muhammad Ali or baseball, that's okay," says Marcus Jackson, the school's principal. "We'll get to the novels later."

Series books are especially popular with kids at this age and can be a great way to hook reluctant readers, who love familiar characters such as Captain Underpants or Big Nate. Getting students hooked on a series sets them up for a summer of reading as well.



Grades 6–8

Solution #1 Get graphic

It's hard to find easy-to-read texts that interest middle schoolers. Jennifer Serravallo, author of *Teaching Reading in Small Groups* and *Conferring With Readers*, suggests seeking out "hi-lo" graphic novels. "There are tons of engaging ones," she says. Capstone, for instance, publishes graphic-novel editions of Shakespeare's plays for grades 5–9 that are written at a grade 2–3 level.

Graphic novels often appeal to older struggling readers, making them a great way to build reading skills, Serravallo says. "Kids tend to really persevere when they're reading graphic novels. They also tend to return to them again and again and again, and there's a whole body of research that shows the power of rereading for improving comprehension and fluency."

Solution #2 Build confidence

By middle school, many struggling readers believe they "just can't read." So it's vitally important that you believe in your students. "You must believe in the child, regardless of the child's situation or circumstances," says Jackson.

To help students build confidence, set them up for small successes. Begin with easier texts, and praise their progression. It's a big deal when a non-reader completes a book independently, even if the book is below grade level.

Contests may motivate some struggling readers. Others respond well to rewards and incentives. Jackson recommends organizing a reading party for all students who meet their monthly reading goals. The party should include things that middle schoolers enjoy, such as music and snacks.

Solution #3 Develop effective routines

The biggest obstacle to transforming nonreaders is to make reading part of their daily lives. Serravallo recommends asking yourself whether the support systems are in place. "Do your students have a reading routine at home?" she asks. "Do they know where the local library is? Do they have a library card?"

One way to encourage daily reading is to challenge students to complete an independent reading project. "For a kid who likes sharks, it might be, 'Over the next month, I'm going to read everything I can about sharks and become an expert,'" Serravallo says. "Another student might use a calendar to plan out which books or chapters she's going to read on what day." □

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